Distinct and powerful African American music traditions are abundant across North Carolina. A few years ago, the North Carolina Arts Council put together a project called the African American Music Trails of Eastern North Carolina to highlight a cluster of eight contiguous counties—Edgecombe, Greene, Jones, Lenoir, Nash, Pitt, Wayne, and Wilson—where music has been an integral part of family, church, and community life for generations. In particular, the project is a celebration of jazz, rhythm and blues, funk, gospel, blues, church music, rap, marching bands.

Eastern North Carolina has produced some of the most transformative figures in the history of jazz, gospel, and popular music. For example:

* Five members of influential funk musician James Brown’s band came from Kinston (including one of today’s performers, Dick Knight)
* Maceo Parker – a saxophonist from Kinston who played with James Brown and Parliament Funkadelic; he’s been touring under his own name since the 1990s
* Thelonius Monk – internationally renowned jazz pianist and composer born in Rocky Mount; second-most recorded jazz composer after Duke Ellington
* Billy Taylor - jazz pianist, composer, artist, and educator from Greenville, NC. He was the Robert L. Jones Distinguished Professor of Music at East Carolina University in Greenville, and from 1994 he was the artistic director for jazz at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.
* Little Eva’s number one hit “Loco-Motion” helped put Kinston on the map (Eva was born in Belhaven, where she is buried, but she lived the end of her life in Kinston)
* Roberta Flack may have been born in Asheville, but her career in music began in Wilson, where she taught and sang with the jazz band The Monitors (both of today’s performers are still members of that band).
* Reverend F.C. Barnes was inspired to compose *Rough Side of the Mountain* on eastern North Carolina roads.

Tobacco warehouses were popular music making spots in these communities. In the 1940s, North Carolina residents heard some of the early stars of R&B play in the tobacco warehouses of eastern North Carolina. Piedmont blues musicians also played frequently for the large crowds at North Carolina tobacco auctions, so it isn’t hard to imagine these styles influencing each other over the years. Native North Carolina blues artists John Dee Holman and the late George Higgs tell of first seeing the blues performed at tobacco warehouses.

Piedmont blues is a finger-picked style of blues guitar influenced by earlier traditions such as ragtime, parlor guitar, and string band music, while rhythm and blues (R&B) is a term that has been used to describe many African American music genres, including electronic blues, soul, funk, disco, and contemporary pop.

The term R&B was originally coined in the 1940s to refer to a genre developing out of jazz (primarily swing and be-bop) and the blues, and it was used by record companies to describe recordings marketed predominantly to urban African Americans.

“Older musicians may testify that the original term was “rhythm in blues.” Early R&B ensembles commonly included a vocalist, electric guitar, saxophone, and a full rhythm section of piano, bass, and drums. Hit songs were upbeat and danceable, with a familiar feel due to the apparent influence of previous music traditions. The call and response form associated with gospel, for example, could often be heard in the dialogue between saxophone and vocal lines.

R&B first thrived in urban areas such as New York City, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles but soon influenced musicians throughout the country, and eventually gained international recognition. North Carolina R&B artists tell of bringing their music to international audiences while away on military leave, participating in international ministry, and while working as touring musicians.” (africanamericanmusicnc.com)

Over the years, the definition of the term rhythm and blues has shifted. In the early 1950s, it was frequently applied to blues records. Starting in the mid-1950s, after this style of music contributed to the development of rock and roll, the term "R&B" was used to refer to music styles that developed from and incorporated electric blues, as well as gospel and soul music. By the 1970s, rhythm and blues was used as a blanket term for soul and funk. In the 1980s, a newer style of R&B developed, becoming known as "contemporary R&B" – music that combines elements of rhythm and blues, soul, funk, pop, hip hop, and dance.

**Bill Myers and Dick Knight,** the duo that plays under the name **Two of a Kind,** are both members of the renowned NC jazz band The Monitors, who performed at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C., in 2011. Myers is the leader and co-founder of The Monitors, and he is the last original member still with the group - he plays piano, saxophone, flute and vibes, in addition to directing, arranging, and composing music. Knight plays trumpet, alto saxophone, and flugel horn, and he is a vocalist from Kinston, NC. Myers and Knight are both featured on the African American Music Trail in Eastern North Carolina, and Myers' life story was featured on NPR. In 2009, Knight was honored by the city of Kinston for his outstanding work with the music and children in his community. In 2014, Myers received the prestigious North Carolina Heritage Award.

**Further Reading**

African American Music Trails of North Carolina. <http://www.africanamericanmusicnc.com/> (June 9, 2015).

Ripani, Richard. *The New Blue Music: Changes in Rhythm & Blues, 1950-1999.* University Press of Mississippi, 2006.